Caribou-Targhee NF

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# Record of Decision

**for the**

# Curlew National Grassland Plan

## Final Environmental Impact Statement

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Part 1

# Introduction

## Introduction to the Curlew Grassland Plan and FEIS

The Curlew National Grassland (hereafter referred to as the "Grassland") is a portion of the Caribou-Targhee National Forest Administrative Unit, specifically administered by the Westside Ranger District. The Grassland is located in the Greater Curlew Valley of southeast Idaho, north of the Utah border and west of Malad, Idaho. The Grassland encompasses approximately 47,000 acres of National Forest System lands intermixed with private land. The Grassland comprises only 9 percent of the 524,000-acre Greater Curlew Valley. Unlike most National Forest System lands, the Grassland is made up of private land purchased by the government in the 1920's to 1940's. The Curlew Valley was homesteaded at the turn of the 20th century but due to the lack of water and poor soils, many farmers could not make a living. Many landowners sold their land, much of it severely eroded, to the government under the authority of the Bankhead-Jones Act. The Soil Conservation Service planted introduced grass species to stabilize the rapidly eroding soils. In 1954, administration of the Grassland was transferred to the Caribou National Forest. Of the 47,000 acre Grassland, only about 12,000 acres remain in native vegetation since they were too steep and rocky to plow. The dominant vegetation on the remaining acreage is a mix of introduced grass species, crested wheatgrass and bulbous bluegrass, with an overstory of several subspecies of big sagebrush. All of the vegetative communities on the Grassland are associated with high elevation desert shrubs.

### Why is the Caribou-Targhee developing this Plan?

The Caribou National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP) of 1985 directs management of the Curlew National Grassland. In a letter to Regional Foresters dated April 22, 1998, former Forest Service Chief Mike Dombeck addressed the importance of the National Grasslands. To recognize the uniqueness of National Grasslands, Chief Dombeck instructed that "future land and resource management plan revision efforts will include the preparation of a separate plan for each national grassland." Instead of combining the Curlew Grassland Plan with the ongoing revision of the 1985 Caribou LRMP, the Forest decided to amend that Plan to include the Grassland Plan. This responds to the concern that "national grassland issues receive less attention in the planning process than comparable issues involving national forests" (Dombeck 1998). In addition, the issues are different on the Curlew than the rest of the Caribou, due to the Grassland's highly modified landscape.

According to rules established to implement the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the Caribou-Targhee National Forest has completed an Environmental Impact Statement which analyzes the effects of several options for a Curlew Grassland Plan. This Plan establishes direction so that all future decisions in the Grassland will include an "interdisciplinary approach to achieve integrated consideration of physical, biological, economic and other sciences." *16 USC 1604.* In addition, the Multiple Use Sustained Yield Act directs national forest and grassland management for the combination of uses that "will best meet the needs of the American people." The selected alternative, described in this Record of Decision, is embodied in the Curlew National Grassland Plan. The Caribou-Targhee is amending the 1985 Caribou LRMP to include this Grassland Plan. The Curlew Plan will then be included in the Caribou Revised Forest Plan, scheduled for completion by the end of 2002.

Part 2

# Public Participation

## Public Involvement and Significant Issues

### Tribal Trust Responsibilities

The Shoshone-Bannock Tribe has ancestral Treaty Rights on all public domain lands reserved for National Forest purposes that are presently administered by the Caribou-Targhee National Forest. The relationship of the United States government with American Indian tribes is based on legal agreements between sovereign nations. The Fort Bridger Treaty of July 3, 1868 provided for the establishment of the Fort Hall Indian Reservation. It also granted hunting and fishing rights to tribal members on "all unoccupied lands of the United States." These rights are still in effect, and management actions in this plan recognize valid rights. Consultation with the Shoshone-Bannock Tribal Council is required on land management activities and allocations that could affect these rights. Forest Supervisor Reese has consulted with the Shoshone-Bannock Tribal Council regarding this amendment and Grassland Plan (FEIS, Chapter 6).

### How was the public involved in developing this Plan?

In February of 1999, a report called the "Analysis of the Management Situation" (AMS) for the Curlew National Grassland, was released for public review. This report included information on the current resource conditions and uses of the Grassland; a description of the range of Desired Future Conditions; and a synopsis of what existing management direction needed to be changed. Public comments were invited on the AMS. News releases, teleconferences, mailings, and personal contacts were made to solicit comments on the AMS. (FEIS, Chapter 6)

Once the Forest received the public comments, they were categorized and used to develop the proposed action for management of the Grassland. In May of 1999, the Forest sent a scoping package to all commenters and published a Notice of Intent to prepare an environmental impact statement (EIS) in the Federal Register. Several comment letters were received in response to the scoping package. The IDT then used public comments from the AMS and from the scoping package to develop preliminary issues. The content analysis of the comments and preliminary issues were sent out to the public for review and several meetings were held. The IDT then refined the issues into the ones used in the EIS to drive the formulation of alternatives to the proposed action. (FEIS, Chapter 6)

In September of 2000, the Draft EIS and Draft Grassland Plan were sent out to the public for review and comment. The comment period lasted 150 days and 66 letters were received from agencies and individuals. The IDT again categorized, analyzed, and responded to these comments. In response to the public comments, the IDT conducted additional field review, more analysis, and blended two existing alternatives from the DEIS to develop a more responsive final Grassland Plan (FEIS, Chapter 6). This will be detailed more in the "Rationale for the Decision" section of this ROD.

## What were the major issues driving the alternatives?

Three significant planning issues were identified through the public and internal scoping process: Riparian and Watershed Management; Vegetation and Wildlife Habitat Management; and Social and Economic Factors. Indicators were developed to measure how each alternative addressed the issues. These are briefly described below. Later in the "Rationale for the Decision" section of this ROD, I will describe how my selected alternative and the Final Grassland Plan address these issues.

### ISSUE 1—RIPARIAN AND WATERSHED MANAGEMENT

**Watershed conditions** on portions of the Grassland are below potential and need to be improved through restoration of natural soil protection features and reestablishment of protective perennial vegetation and litter. Many stream channels and **riparian areas** on the Grassland have been degraded and need to be improved to attain properly functioning condition (PFC). The following indicators were used to measure resource changes: acres disturbed at one time; potential erosion (tons); and miles of stream at or moving toward PFC.

### ISSUE 2—VEGETATION AND WILDLIFE HABITAT MANAGEMENT

The IDT conducted an upland Properly Functioning Condition assessment to measure how the Grassland resources compared with historical range of conditions. This method, developed and approved by the Intermountain Region specialists, was used to assess Grassland risks and to measure the effects of the alternatives on the "sub-issues" of **sagebrush** and **mountain brush** communities.

**Vegetation understory composition** was another sub-issue of concern on the Grassland. As a result of stabilization efforts in the early part of last century, many acres are dominated by the non-native bulbous bluegrass (*Poa bulbosa*) which has little value for wildlife species and low value for livestock forage. Treating these acres to remove this species requires a substantial investment and the success has been varied. In addition, the majority of the other acres are dominated by crested wheatgrass (*Agropyron cristatum*), another non-native which has high values for forage and may have more benefit for wildlife. Controversy exists on whether the Grassland Plan should focus on restoring native understories or continue to use desirable non-native species which produce high volumes of forage. Indicators used to measure the understory vegetation changes are acres of bulbous bluegrass treated and acres reseeded or interseeded using native species.

The sub-issue of **wildlife habitat management** was broken into five parts for the purpose of analysis. Because of the regional importance of the Grassland in both Columbian sharp-tailed and sage grouse management, much of the wildlife issue revolved around grouse habitat. The most recent information on sage grouse indicates that critical factors in sage grouse success are habitat fragmentation; amount of residual vegetation after livestock grazing for hiding cover; and density of sagebrush stands (Connelly 2000). The Greater Curlew Valley (GCV) itself has been highly fragmented over the past century. Many people are concerned that the Grassland may offer the only opportunity to have a solid block of sagebrush in the GCV. Management activities on the Grassland could further fragment sagebrush habitat. To measure this, the FEIS displays the number of large patches of sagebrush remaining at the end of the decade. Since retention of sagebrush in the >15 percent canopy cover classes also appears to be critical to sage grouse management, one of the issues is the amount of prescribed fire used. Prescribed fire generally takes an area back to the 0-5 percent canopy cover class

which has little value for sage grouse nesting or winter habitat. Controversy exists on whether the tree rows are beneficial to wildlife or if they harbor predators and contribute to nest depredation. The issues and indicators used for the wildlife habitat management sub-issue are detailed in the table below.

| ISSUE | INDICATOR |
|---|---|
| Fragmentation and future management of sagebrush communities | • # of 320-acre patches of >15% canopy cover remaining<br>• % of sagebrush acres in potential sage grouse nesting habitat at the end of year 10 (16-24% canopy cover) |
| Livestock grazing levels and residual vegetation for sage grouse management | Meets, Partially meets, or does not meet the Idaho Sage Grouse Guidelines |
| Use of prescribed fire in an area important to sage grouse | Acres of sagebrush >15% canopy cover treated with Rx fire |
| Wildlife population viability | Viability analysis rankings |
| Value of the tree rows | Miles of tree rows at the end of the decade |

### ISSUE 3—SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC FACTORS

The **economic and social values** of the Grassland are very important to many commenters, particularly those living in the local area. They are concerned that Grassland management would have impacts on jobs, incomes, county revenues, and the way of life in this rural southeast Idaho area. Many other commenters contend that the benefits of grazing and vegetation management should outweigh the costs. Indicators include changes in jobs, income, government payments, present net value, and the total annual costs and fair market values of the grazing program.

Some people advocate that the Grassland should be managed as a **reserve/preserve**. The degree to which each alternative addressed this sub-issue was measured by the number of acres without livestock grazing.

Finally, **livestock grazing** was a sub-issue addressed in the analysis. There is a sizeable amount of controversy regarding the amount of grazing that is sustainable on the Grassland. Some people feel livestock use levels are too high, others think the vegetation could withstand higher use levels. The IDT used potential head months, allowable use levels and the amount of vegetation to be treated, to measure effects of the alternatives on livestock grazing.

Part 3

# Alternatives

## Alternatives Considered

**What alternatives were considered to address the issues?**

Based on the AMS and public comments, the IDT developed a Proposed Action to address the major amendment topics. The significant issues described above were used to develop several alternatives to the Proposed Action. Finally, after receiving and analyzing public comments on the Draft EIS, the IDT blended two existing alternatives (F and G) into my selected alternative, Alternative H. These are all described below; Chapter 2 of the FEIS contains a more detailed description of the alternatives.

All of the action alternatives propose to implement new livestock grazing utilization standards, develop soil and watershed management direction, improve direction for sagebrush obligate wildlife species habitat, and develop policy for future utility proposals. A special riparian prescription would be applied to streams in the Grassland even though headwaters are located on private, state, or other federal land outside the jurisdiction of the Forest Service.

### ALTERNATIVE A—NO ACTION (CURRENT PLAN DIRECTION)

Alternative A proposes to carry forward the direction from the current (1985) Caribou LRMP. This alternative would use prescribed fire to improve diversity in the sagebrush canopy cover classes and increase forage production for livestock. The majority of the sagebrush acres would be managed on a 20-year rotation of vegetation treatments designed to provide forage for livestock grazing. To meet these objectives, it is estimated that 18,750 acres of sagebrush would be treated over the next ten years. No seeding would occur unless determined necessary by subsequent site-specific analysis. No direction would be included for treatment of bulbous bluegrass in sagebrush understories. No preference would be given to revegetating with native or non-native plant species; this would also be determined during the site-specific analysis.

In this alternative, riparian areas would continue to be managed at minimum custodial levels required to comply with existing laws. Direction for sage grouse management would use guidelines established by Braun *et al.* 1977.

The Grassland would be open to cross-country motorized travel from December 1 to August 31. Designated routes would be used during the remainder of the year.

Approximately 1006 acres would not be suitable for livestock grazing; this includes campgrounds, Sweeten Pond, and the tree row areas. No specific livestock grazing utilization standards would be established but the majority of the Grassland acres would be grazed at 60% use, as defined in the Allotment Management Plans (AMP). No riparian stubble height or other utilization standard would be defined.

## ALTERNATIVE B—PROPOSED ACTION (FROM NOI)

This alternative proposes to implement livestock grazing utilization standards, develop soil and watershed management direction, improve direction for sagebrush/obligate wildlife species habitat, and develop policy for future utility proposals. Watersheds and riparian areas would be managed to maintain stability or accelerate recovery. This alternative would establish Riparian/Wetland emphasis areas (RWAs) for the maintenance of riparian and stream channel processes. Riparian utilization levels would be 30 percent or a 6-inch stubble height, whichever is attained first.

Alternative B proposes to manage wildlife habitat by constructing an additional pond in the Sweeten Pond area and ten miles of trees rows. It prohibits vegetation treatments within 0.25 miles of active sage grouse leks in habitats considered suitable for sage grouse nesting and brood-rearing.

In this alternative, sagebrush in greater than 15 percent canopy cover would be treated with prescribed fire over the next ten years to improve diversity of sagebrush canopy cover while increasing forage production in the understory. Sagebrush would be managed for the majority of acres in 6-15 percent and greater than 15 percent canopy cover classes for wildlife habitat quality and long-term maintenance. This alternative would result in proposing to treat approximately 2,000 acres of sagebrush using fire. Revegetation on treated sites would occur through natural regeneration. No seeding would occur. Approximately 150 acres of mountain brush would be proposed for treatment using prescribed fire in this alternative.

An additional 3,700 acres (1,200 acres in 6-15 percent canopy cover, and 2,500 acres in greater than 15 percent canopy cover) of bulbous bluegrass sites would be prioritized for treatment using prescribed fire and plowing to improve understory diversity. Bulbous bluegrass sites would be revegetated using both non-native and native grass, forbs and shrub seed mixes. Treated sites would generally be at least 500 acres or larger.

The Grassland would be open to motorized cross-country travel from December 1 to August 31. Motorized travel would be placed on designated routes from September 1 to November 30. During the snow season, the Grassland would be open to over the snow vehicles.

Approximately 98 percent of the Grassland would be suitable for livestock grazing. Livestock forage utilization would be established at 45% for native vegetation and 50% non-native vegetation.

## ALTERNATIVE C

This alternative was developed to enhance sagebrush habitat for sagebrush obligate species such as the sage grouse, pygmy rabbit, Brewer's sparrow, sage sparrow, and others. Vegetation treatments would be used to provide quality habitat and the quantity of habitat necessary to sustain life cycles and populations of these species.

Watersheds and riparian areas would be managed to maintain stability or accelerate recovery and to provide late summer sage grouse brood habitat. This alternative would establish Riparian/Wetland Areas (RWAs) using a 150-foot special emphasis zone for riparian and stream channel processes. Deep-rooted vegetation (sedges/willows) would be established on 3 miles of perennial stream over the next ten years. New livestock facilities would be placed outside RWAs. Riparian utilization levels

would be established at 20-50 percent or a 2-6-inch stubble height based on season of grazing, stream channel type, and current and desired riparian condition. These actions would emphasize improving the trend on 10 percent of the non-functioning perennial stream reaches per year over the next ten years.

The majority of sagebrush acres would be managed for sagebrush canopy cover in greater than 15 percent. Vegetation treatments would take into account the condition of adjacent land and sage grouse needs. In this alternative, all suitable sage grouse habitats within 3.2 miles of an active lek would be protected. To attain 15-25 percent canopy cover and maintain sagebrush for sage grouse, approximately 2,500 acres of sagebrush in greater than 25 percent canopy cover would likely be treated using herbicides over the next ten years. Revegetation would occur through natural regeneration; no seeding would occur on these acres. No mountain brush treatment is proposed.

To improve understory diversity for sage grouse, approximately 1,500 acres of bulbous bluegrass in less than 15 percent canopy cover would need to be treated by brush beating/plowing and prescribed fire over the next ten years. Vegetation treatments would be prioritized based on sage grouse biological needs, including pre-nesting, nesting and brood-rearing habitat. Bulbous bluegrass in sagebrush understories would be treated and revegetated using a native-only grass, forbs and shrub seed mix. Treated sites would generally be smaller than in other alternatives--less than 500 acres.

Motorized travel would be restricted in this alternative to designated routes year-round. During the snow season, the Grassland would be open to over-the-snow vehicles.

Approximately 1,125 acres would be considered "not suitable" for livestock grazing in this alternative. On the suitable acres, livestock forage utilization would be reduced from current levels to provide vegetation cover for nesting grouse and to aid in riparian area recovery. Upland livestock utilization levels would be established at 30-40 percent, or a residual vegetation height of 7 inches, whichever occurs first regardless of whether the vegetation is native or non-native.

### ALTERNATIVE D—NO GRAZING

This alternative focuses on maintaining the Grassland as a reference reserve. All 47,525 acres of the Grassland would be considered "not suitable" for livestock grazing in this alternative. Ecological patterns and processes would be allowed to evolve under natural conditions over time. No vegetation treatments would be anticipated. Watersheds and riparian areas are left to evolve under natural processes and as influenced by the upper portions of the watershed in other ownerships, except to maintain viable populations of wildlife species, if necessary.

Alternative D proposes to manage wildlife habitat by implementing vegetation treatments only when necessary to improve habitats to maintain minimum viable populations of wildlife species. Prescribed fire is the primary management tool used to achieve habitats conditions to maintain minimum viable populations of wildlife species. The majority of sagebrush acres are left to evolve under natural processes (with the exception of wildfire suppression). Sagebrush acres are managed to trend successionally to late seral structure and composition. No goals for treatment of sagebrush or mountain brush are set in this alternative.

Motorized travel would be restricted in this alternative to designated routes year-round. During the snow season, the Grassland would be open to over-the-snow vehicles.

## ALTERNATIVE E

This alternative addresses economic and social outcomes and meets legal requirements for soil, air and water. Vegetation management would be used aggressively to enhance the capability of the Grassland to produce forage, mainly for livestock grazing. Watersheds and riparian areas would be managed to maintain stability and to provide forage production for livestock grazing and wildlife. The green line, that vegetation directly adjacent to the stream channel, would be the emphasis zone for riparian and stream channel processes. Riparian utilization levels would be established at 50 percent or a greater than 3-inch stubble height at the end of the grazing season on riparian sedge (*Carex spp.*) species. This would emphasize improving the trend on 10 percent of the non-functioning perennial stream reaches per year over the next ten years.

Alternative E would manage wildlife habitat by avoiding vegetation treatments within 0.25 miles of active sage grouse leks in habitats considered suitable for sage grouse nesting and brood-rearing habitat.

The majority of sagebrush acres are managed for sagebrush canopy cover in less than 5 percent canopy cover to enhance/maintain grass and forbs production for livestock grazing. To improve forage production and attain 0-5 percent sagebrush canopy cover for livestock, approximately 7,500 acres would likely be treated using prescribed fire over the next ten years. To improve sagebrush canopy cover diversity and increase forage production for livestock, an additional 7,000 acres would need to be treated using herbicides. Revegetation on these acres would occur through natural regeneration. About 200 acres of mountain brush would be scheduled for treatment over the next ten years using prescribed fire to attain early seral structure and composition.

To increase forage production for livestock grazing, approximately 2,500 acres of bulbous bluegrass would be proposed for treatment over the next ten years using prescribed fire, plowing, and herbicide applications. Revegetation on bulbous bluegrass sites would be accomplished with non-native and native species emphasizing forage production. Treated sites would generally be at least 500 acres.

The Grassland would be open to motorized cross-country travel from December 1 to August 31. Motorized travel would be placed on designated routes from September 1 to November 30. During the snow season, the Grassland would be open to over the snow vehicles.

Approximately 1,006 acres would be considered “not suitable” for livestock grazing, the remaining acres (98%) would be suitable. When forage production approaches 800 pounds per acre on non-native vegetation sites, these sites would be prioritized for treatment. Upland forage utilization levels would be established at 50-60 percent for both native and non-native vegetation.

## ALTERNATIVE F

This alternative addresses ecological patterns, processes, and management direction for both riparian and upland resources, including restoration of rangeland vegetation composition. Watersheds and riparian areas would be managed to maintain stability or accelerate recovery. This alternative proposes

to manage riparian/wetland areas using a 150-foot special emphasis zone for riparian and stream channel processes. Deep-rooted (sedges/willows) vegetation would be established on 3 miles of perennial stream by 2010. Riparian utilization levels would be established at 20-50 percent or a 2-6-inch stubble height, based on season of use, stream channel type, existing versus the desired riparian condition. These standards would emphasize improving trend on 10 percent of the non-functioning perennial stream reaches per year over the next ten years.

Alternative F would manage wildlife habitat by avoiding vegetation treatments within 0.25 miles of active sage grouse leks in habitats considered suitable for sage grouse nesting and brood-rearing habitat, with exceptions. Approximately 2,700 acres of sage grouse habitat would be proposed for treatment using prescribed fire.

To improve sagebrush canopy cover diversity and attain 6-15 percent canopy over the next ten years, approximately 9,600 acres with canopy cover in greater than 15 percent would be proposed for treatment using herbicides. The sagebrush would be managed to provide balance in sagebrush canopy diversity. Revegetation on these acres after treatment would occur through natural regeneration. Approximately 200 acres of mountain brush would be proposed for treatment in this alternative using prescribed fire as the primary management tool to achieve a mix of age and structural classes.

To improve understory diversity in the bulbous bluegrass sites, this alternative would involve future treatments of 2,500 acres of bulbous bluegrass in the sagebrush understory. Treatments would likely include prescribed fire and plowing. Only native grasses, forbs and shrub seed mix would be used for revegetation on treated bulbous bluegrass sites. Treated sites would generally tend to be at least 500 acres or larger.

Motorized travel would be restricted in this alternative to designated routes year-round. During the snow season, the Grassland would be open to over-the-snow vehicles.

Approximately 1,125 acres would be considered "not suitable" for livestock grazing. In suitable areas, upland forage utilization levels would be 40-50 percent for native and non-native vegetation.

### ALTERNATIVE G

This alternative addresses ecological patterns and processes weighted more toward providing heavier sagebrush canopy cover during the first ten-year planning period. In this alternative, where riparian areas are not currently in riparian pastures, all perennial riparian areas would be fenced to exclude livestock grazing. Riparian fencing would occur first before any other treatments were initiated. Grazing would be permitted in fenced riparian exclosures once every five years to maintain plant vigor. Riparian pasture and exclosure grazing utilization would retain 6 inches of vegetation height, or no more than 30 percent utilization on the greenline, whichever is attained first, at the end of the grazing season on riparian sedge species. Fifty percent of woody species would be retained. Bank disturbance would not exceed 40 percent total (both banks), or 20 percent annually (both banks).

Alternative G proposes to manage wildlife habitat by managing vegetation treatments as described in the most current version of Idaho Sage Grouse Guidelines, within 5 kilometers (3.2 miles) of occupied sage grouse leks, except where bulbous bluegrass is present. One additional pond would be constructed in the Sweeten Pond exclosure.

To provide for more balance between sagebrush canopy cover while allowing livestock grazing to continue, approximately 2,500 acres in greater than 15 percent canopy cover would be treated outside of bulbous bluegrass areas. These areas would likely be treated by a light herbicide treatment to attain a 6-15 percent sagebrush canopy cover. Revegetation on treated sites would occur through natural regeneration. No seeding would occur.

Approximately 2,500 sagebrush acres in greater than 15 percent canopy cover with bulbous bluegrass in the understory would be prioritized for treatment using prescribed fire and plowing to improve understory diversity. Treated sites would be revegetated using both non-native and native grass, forbs and shrub seed mixes. Treated sites would generally be 500 acres or larger.

Motorized travel would be restricted in this alternative to designated routes year-round. During the snow season, the Grassland would be open to over-the-snow vehicles.

Approximately 1,006 acres would be considered "not suitable" for livestock grazing in this alternative. On the suitable acres, upland forage utilization levels would be established at 40-50 percent.

### ALTERNATIVE H—SELECTED ALTERNATIVE

In response to public comments on the Draft EIS and Draft Grassland Plan, Alternative H was developed to manage the resources using a combination of features primarily from Alternative F and Alternative G. It features an emphasis on adaptive management and monitoring to resolve uncertainties regarding management of the Grassland resources. An adaptive management strategy offers an avenue to describe and evaluate the consequences of changing conditions and knowledge. Monitoring and additional analysis are used to chart the course for future management actions within the framework of the Grassland Plan.

In Alternative H, management would focus on treatments necessary to maintain the current acreage of mature sagebrush, focusing on increasing acres in the 6-15 percent canopy cover class to create habitat for sage grouse nesting and brood rearing in the next decade. Treatments would be designed to move upland vegetation toward properly functioning conditions. With new information, technology and monitoring results, treatment methods and/or locations may change. These changes would be evaluated when individual treatments are proposed in specific locations on the Grassland.

Management would also emphasize improving conditions on streams that are "at risk" or "non-functioning" and maintaining those that are in properly functioning condition. Treatments and management standards also would improve wildlife habitat and understory vegetation diversity. Riparian corridor fencing would be done on the "at risk" streams that would benefit from this type of fencing. Other perennial streams would be included in riparian pastures by realigning existing pasture boundaries, where possible. Livestock use levels would be 20 to 50 percent (2-6" stubble) depending on the PFC rating of the stream.

Livestock grazing would be managed to a level consistent with the desired resource conditions. The alternative is designed to respond to public comments and address the issues of sagebrush overstory and understory composition, economic changes as a result of decreased forage production and related livestock carrying capacity, wildlife habitat, riparian condition and watershed condition.

In this alternative, existing sagebrush canopy cover classes would be maintained, with improvement in understory diversity, beginning with areas dominated by bulbous bluegrass. This alternative would maintain the current amount of sagebrush in the >15 percent canopy cover class, focusing on **long-term** retention of sagebrush in the 16-24 percent canopy class. It is anticipated that approximately 9,600 acres of sagebrush would be treated with herbicides over the next ten years to do this. In addition, 2,500 acres of bulbous bluegrass in the sagebrush understory would be prioritized for treatment to improve understory diversity. Treatments would include prescribed fire, plowing and reseeding or other methods, such as ground or aerial herbicide applications, if available and appropriate. In this alternative, the emphasis is on outcome (sagebrush canopy and understory) rather than method(s) used.

Motorized travel would be restricted in this alternative to designated routes year-round. During the snow season, the Grassland would be open to over-the-snow vehicles.

Approximately 1,006 acres would be considered "not suitable" for livestock grazing where fencing will continue to be used to exclude livestock grazing. On the suitable acres, livestock forage utilization standards would average 50 percent by weight across the Grassland. Use levels will vary by pasture, however, based on the value for sage grouse nesting habitat and dominant grass species.

## ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED BUT ELIMINATED FROM DETAILED ANALYSIS

The following eight alternatives were considered during the development of alternatives but were eliminated from detailed consideration for reasons summarized below (FEIS, Chapter 2).

- Return to Private Land—Forest Service lacks authority to transfer lands to private ownership.
- Turn Administration of the Grassland over to the Bureau of Land Management—*Forest Service lacks authority to transfer Grassland lands to the BLM.*
- Research Mandate for Sustainable Agriculture—Use of Grassland solely for research is not in compliance with NFMA or the Bankhead-Jones Act.
- Creation of Wilderness Areas—Lands within the Grassland do not meet the criteria for wilderness designation or recommendation.
- Intermingled Lands Management—Essentially the same as Alternatives B and F.
- Intermingled Lands Management focused on Riparian and Wildlife Habitat—*Same as above.*
- Alternative X: Restore Grassland to native plant and animal pre-settlement conditions—Investment, disturbance and risks from restoring the pre-settlement conditions would be too great and likely not worth the potential benefits due to the extent of landscape modifications on the Grassland.
- Alternative Y: Watershed Management—Principles of this alternative were incorporated into Alternative F, which is analyzed in detail.

## How do the alternatives compare to each other?

The following table is an abbreviated version of the comparison of alternatives in Chapter 2 of the Final EIS and Executive Summary.

| **Alternative ⏩ Issue ▼** | **A** | **B** | **C** | **D** | **E** | **F** | **G** | **H** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Riparian and Watershed Mgt—amount of disturbance (1 is least, 8 is most) | 5 | 4 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| Riparian—stream recovery rate (1 is fastest) | 6 | 4 | 3 | 1 | 5 | 3 | 2 | 3 |
| Vegetation (sagebrush)—percent of CNG >15% canopy cover in year 10 | 46 | 68 | 79 | 79 | 51 | 60 | 71 | 60 |
| Wildlife Habitat—How meets 2000 Sage Grouse Guidelines | Does not meet | Partially meets | Best meets | Partially meets | Does not meet | Partially meets | Meets | Partially meets |
| Wildlife Habitat--% of sagebrush acres in potential sage grouse nesting habitat at the end of year 10 (16-24% canopy cover) | 18% | 24% | 26% | 26% | 19% | 24% | 24% | 37% |
| Wildlife Habitat—Patches >320 acres of sage grouse nesting habitat >15% cc | 7 | 12 | 19 | 19 | 0 | 3 | 12 | 6* |
| Economics—Present Net Value (millions of dollars) | 14.422 | 14.110 | 13.192 | 11.713 | 13.324 | 12.783 | 13.372 | 13.229 |
| Economics--% change in income in Oneida | +23% | +6% | -24% | -86% | +15% | +6% | -3% | +13% |
| Livestock Grazing—% change in potential head months, year 10 using mid-range forage production estimates | +26% | -1%> | -41% | -100% | +27% | -10% | -21% | -1%> |

*: 10 patches will go to 6-15% canopy cover due to thinning treatments and will become available in the second decade.

Part 4

# The Decision

## Curlew National Grassland Plan (Alternative H)

### What are the Key Features of the Grassland Plan?

The Forest Plan establishes direction so that all future decisions in the planning area will include an " interdisciplinary approach to achieve integrated consideration of physical, biological, economic and other sciences" [16 USC 1604(b), (f), (g) and (i)]. It also provides direction to assure coordination of multiple-uses (outdoor recreation, range, timber, watershed, wildlife, fish, minerals, and wilderness) and the sustained-yield of products and services [16 USC 1604(e)]. Plan approval does not authorize, fund, or carry out any projects, unless specifically stated in the Record of Decision.

#### SPECIFIC MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

The Curlew Grassland Plan developed from my selected alternative, H, is designed to maintain current conditions or improve conditions where they are less than satisfactory. As discussed previously in this ROD and in the FEIS and Plan, the Grassland is a highly modified landscape and many of the basic tenets of ecology and rangeland science are not readily applied here. For this reason, I have chosen an alternative which emphasizes adaptive management. This process of continual monitoring and management adjustment will insure that the Grassland is managed to benefit a wide array of species and maintain ecological processes.

Riparian systems on the Grassland are generally in less than satisfactory condition. The Grassland Plan establishes Riparian/Wetland Areas (RWA) to manage these important habitats. Watersheds and riparian areas would be managed to maintain stability or accelerate the present rate of recovery by establishing riparian use standards based on the stream system conditions. Cattle will be fenced out of about 5 miles of streams to facilitate more rapid recovery. Other streams will be managed within riparian pastures so that livestock use can be more strictly controlled.

As mentioned previously, there are things we do not know about the interactions between Grassland habitats and the wildlife species that use them. In particular, the Grassland appears to be an important area for sage grouse but have insufficient information to determine which habitat factors are governing the population. Current research on grouse indicates that sage grouse nesting habitat is a limiting factor. Thus, one of the desired future conditions for the Grassland is to maintain current levels of sagebrush in the >15% canopy cover levels which are important for grouse. Because the open sagebrush stands are constantly becoming more dense due to succession, the acres that are currently optimum sage grouse nesting habitat (16-25 percent canopy cover class), will move into the >25% canopy cover class in the next decade. To counteract this, the Plan gives direction to treat about 9,600 acres of sagebrush over the next decade to move it from the greater than 25 percent canopy cover class back to the 6-15 and 16-25 percent cover classes. Given current options, herbicides or mechanical equipment would be used to thin the sagebrush over the next ten years. Prescribed fire or

other methods could be used if they will achieve the desired resource objectives. Direction in the Plan would likely result in the Forest proposing to treat 2,500 acres of sagebrush with an understory dominated by bulbous bluegrass.

Livestock utilization of upland herbaceous vegetation across the Grassland would be 50 percent by dry weight each year. Allowable use levels in individual pastures, however, would be determined in the Allotment Planning Process and Annual Operating meetings. The Grassland Plan includes guidance allowing for heavier use levels on some sites, such as crested wheatgrass areas, where this higher use is needed periodically to maintain overall plant vigor. Use levels may be lower in areas important to nesting sage grouse to maintain adequate residual vegetation for hiding cover and/or native understory sites. These levels would be determined using an interdisciplinary, adaptive management process.

## How does the Grassland Plan meet the intent of the National Forest Management Act?

According to NFMA, Grassland Plans must include specific information and decisions. The Plan:

- Contains a set of goals and objectives that lead to ecological sustainability, contributes to economic and social sustainability, and provides for multiple uses. (36 CFR 219.11(b))—Chapter 3 of the Grassland Plan.

- Establishes forest [grassland]-wide requirements (standards and guidelines) that apply to future management activities. (36 CFR 219.13 to 219.27)—Chapter 3 of the Grassland Plan.

- Establishes management direction through the use of prescription area designation. Prescriptions and management direction are the framework under which future site-specific decisions are made. (36 CFR 219.11(c))—Chapter Four of the Grassland Plan.

- Designates suitable timber land and establishes the allowable timber sale quantity for the planning period. (36 CFR 219.14 and 219.16)—This is not applicable to the Grassland.

- Determines nonwilderness allocations or wilderness recommendations. (36 CFR 219.17)—This is not applicable to the Grassland.

- Establishes monitoring and evaluation requirements. (36 CFR 219.11(d))—Chapter Five of the Grassland Plan.

The Grassland Plan is intentionally more flexible than the 1985 Forest Plan, allows for a diversity of approaches, and encourages experimentation. As directed by the Region 1/Region 4 Planning Strategy, this Plan focuses on desired future conditions and outcomes and the pathway to achieve those desired states more than mandating an exhaustive set of prescriptive standards and guidelines.

Coupled with the laws and regulations applicable to the project level, the Plan creates a management system for future decision-making. Projects and activities are proposed, analyzed and carried out within the framework of the plan. All projects remain subject to site-specific analysis and continuing compliance with Federal environmental laws, such as the Endangered Species Act, NEPA, Clean Water Act, and Clean Air Act.

Through monitoring and evaluation, new activities can be added to the Plan with consideration of cumulative impacts and consistency with the general strategic intent of the Plan. This is adaptive management, a continuous cycle of activity, evaluation and review, adaptation and change.

## GRASSLAND-WIDE DIRECTION (36 CFR 219.11(B) AND 36 CFR 219.13 TO 219.27)

The Grassland Plan contains Desired Future Conditions and Goals for the long-term conditions on the Grassland. Grassland-wide DFCs and Goals are described both for overall conditions and for specific resource areas. A few of these are listed below. The DFCs are long-term conditions for the Grassland to achieve in the next century or so. From the DFCs, goals were developed, which should be reached in this planning period (10-15 years). Objectives have been established to measure the progress towards meeting the DFC's and Goals, some of the key objectives are listed below. The Plan also establishes Standards and Guidelines which determine how those objectives, goals and DFCs will be met. This Grassland-wide direction is found in Chapter 3 of the Curlew Grassland Plan.

### Key Desired Future Conditions

- The landscape displays an interconnected balance of physical landscape components, including upland terrestrial habitat, riparian areas, wetlands, and clean water.
- Soil quality, productivity and function are maintained or restored where needed.
- Rangelands reflect a mosaic of multiple-aged shrubs, forbs, and grasses with emphasis on maintaining or recreating diverse plant communities.
- Vegetation management treatments maintain or diversify the mosaic of shrub steppe plant communities while reducing habitat fragmentation. Most of the altered sagebrush steppe has also been diversified by the addition of various desirable grasses, forbs, and shrubs, including native species.
- Watersheds provide for natural infiltration, retention, and release of water appropriate to soil type, vegetation, climate and landform.
- Habitats [terrestrial and aquatic] contain sufficient complexity, diversity and productivity that they can maintain viable populations of native and desirable non-native species.
- Tribal treaty rights and other Federal trust responsibilities are met.
- Livestock grazing levels are sustainable and contribute to a stable social and economic foundation. Grazing systems are designed to promote plant and animal diversity and to move the Grassland toward desired future conditions of other resources.

### Key Grassland Plan Objectives

- Within 10 years of the ROD, reassess vegetation PFC of ecosystems on the Grassland and adjacent areas, to determine if resources are moving toward DFCs.
- Establish an upward trend on all perennial riparian systems within the next decade.

- Assess the changes to sagebrush habitats in the Greater Curlew Valley, including canopy cover, adjacent land use, understory conditions, every five years. Coordinate with interested groups.

- Within 2 years of the ROD, develop a map in cooperation with IDFG to identify functional and degraded [sage grouse] breeding habitat.

- Within 2 years of the ROD, map stream reaches and identify existing and potential willow shrub communities.

- Inventory 100 to 500 acres of the Grassland each year to locate and identify archaeological and historic properties.

- Within 3 years of the ROD, update AMPs for the Curlew Valley and Buist Association fields.

- Within 2 years of the ROD, develop a monitoring protocol for livestock utilization monitoring and recording on the Grassland, following the Caribou-Targhee Rangeland Monitoring Protocol and Forest Service Handbook direction.

- For riparian improvement, by 2008 corridor fence those streams that are "at risk" and will benefit from that fencing.

- On the remaining perennial streams, outside of existing riparian pastures and corridor fenced "at risk" streams, fence into riparian pastures using existing boundary fences by 2010.

- In the next decade, treat 2,500 acres of bulbous bluegrass and reseed with native and non-native grass, forb, and shrub seed mixtures.

- In the next decade, treat 9,600 acres of sagebrush with herbicides or other appropriate methods to reduce canopy cover from >25% canopy cover to achieve resource objectives.

## MANAGEMENT PRESCRIPTION AREA DIRECTION (36 CFR 219.11(C))

Management prescriptions, a set of management practices, have been applied to specific areas of land to attain multiple-use and other goals and objectives on the Grassland. Management prescriptions in the Plan identify the emphasis and focus of management activities in a specific area; however, ***emphasis,*** as used in this context, is defined as a focus or a highlight and does not necessarily mean exclusive use. The specific direction stated in a management prescription determines what uses are allowed and to what extent the uses are permitted. The Curlew Grassland Plan establishes the following Prescription Areas on the landscape. The direction for each of these management prescriptions is detailed in Chapter 4 of the Grassland Plan.

Table 2: Management prescriptions on the Grassland.

| Prescription | Acres | Percent of Grassland |
|---|---|---|
| 2.8.8 Riparian/Wetland Areas | 921 | <1% |
| 3.4.1 Special Wildlife Areas | 507 | <1% |
| 4.1.2 Developed Recreation Sites | 25 | <1% |
| 6.5 Rangeland Vegetation/ Upland Game Bird Habitat Management | 45,987 | 96% |
| 8.1.2 Concentrated Development Sites | 175 | <1% |
| Total | 47,525 | 100% |

## MONITORING AND ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT (36 CFR 219.11(D))

NFMA monitoring for management plan implementation involves both minimum legally required monitoring activities, as well as additional monitoring that are conducted based on the availability of funding and personnel. The evaluation provides an analysis of how close the national grasslands and forests are to reaching the desired conditions identified in the Plan. The Monitoring and Evaluation Report is the tool to keep the public informed on the management of the Grassland.

This Grassland Plan uses adaptive management to insure that the management of this ecosystem responds to changing conditions and new information. As explained in the Final EIS and in the Plan, the Curlew National Grassland is unique in many ways. The highly altered landscape affords many challenges since principles of management for native ecosystems do not apply universally here. During development of the plan, many questions have arisen regarding the proper way to manage the Grassland to achieve the Desired Future Conditions. Although the analysis reflects the best information available for Grassland management, some of the basic tenets have not been validated on the Grassland itself. For this reason, managers must be able to respond quickly to new information and practices obtained from site-specific monitoring. Adaptive management allows managers to respond to changing conditions without having to amend the Grassland Plan as often as with conventional NEPA decisions. The monitoring program was designed for the optimal level, assuming the Grassland Plan is fully funded. It is unlikely that annual budgets will fully fund the monitoring effort. Priorities for the annual monitoring effort are based on annual budgets and program direction.

The Grassland Monitoring Plan (Chapter 5 of the Plan) emphasizes filling in knowledge and documentation gaps. Some of the key components are listed below:

- Changes in sagebrush canopy over time in the Greater Curlew Valley; including natural and man-made disturbances
- Changes in understory and overstory vegetation due to treatments; including evaluation of sage grouse habitat quality
- Management Indicator Species (MIS)—sage grouse and riparian breeding birds
- Riparian system recovery—using riparian Properly Functioning Condition (PFC) assessments
- Livestock use—yearly utilization mapping and upland and riparian key area use transects
- Develop monitoring in consultation with Regional Ecologist for bulbous bluegrass treatments

## What is the Rationale for my decision?

HOW THE GRASSLAND PLAN ADDRESSES THE SIGNIFICANT ISSUES

### Riparian and Watershed Management

The Grassland Plan resolves this issue by establishing Riparian/Wetland Areas (RWA). These 75-150 foot corridors along riparian systems will be managed separately using direction developed to improve their properly functioning condition (PFC) status. In this alternative and the associated Grassland Plan, approximately five miles of "at-risk" streams which would benefit from livestock exclusion would be corridor fenced. These would be the streams that have the greatest recovery potential over the shortest amount of time. Grazing would not be allowed within the riparian corridor fences unless needed to maintain plant vigor. All other perennial streams would be managed within riparian pastures, using existing fences, where possible. Placing these stream segments into riparian pastures should assist in reducing streamside grazing pressures aiding in the recovery of degraded riparian systems and maintaining those that are functioning properly (Prescription 2.8.8 management direction). The Plan includes direction to maintain soil productivity, microbiotic crusts, and perennial vegetation, and allows for projects which will improve understory diversity and overall watershed conditions. The Plan addresses riparian and watershed management in other ways, such as:

- Establishing an upward trend on all perennial riparian systems within the next decade. (Grassland-wide Riparian Objective 1)
- Developing and implementing a riparian grazing management protocol. (Grassland-wide Livestock Management Objective 2, Standard 1)
- Establishing a prescription to manage Riparian Wetland Areas (RWAs). (Prescription 2.8.8)
- Restricting new recreation facilities, trail corridors, and livestock handling facilities from being constructed in RWAs. (Prescription 2.8.8, Recreation Standard 1, Livestock Management Standard 2)
- Establishing stubble heights, percent utilization limits, bank disturbance, soil disturbance, and woody species utilization limits depending upon the stream condition and channel type. (Prescription 2.8.8, Livestock Management Standard 1)

### Vegetation and Wildlife Habitat Management

The Grassland Plan contains objectives to maintain the current percentage of acres in the higher canopy cover classes over the next decade. During this time, monitoring and evaluation will be initiated to better understand the relationships between vegetation community structure and wildlife habitat. Sagebrush management is designed to improve understory diversity and structural diversity of the overstory. Livestock utilization will be lower in areas important for sage grouse nesting habitat while heavier where needed to maintain plant vigor. The Plan calls for using established protocols for monitoring utilization, wildlife habitat features, effectiveness of treatments, and other factors.

Although the Grassland comprises only 9 percent of the Greater Curlew Valley, the public expects Grassland management to take a leading role in managing for sagebrush obligate wildlife species. The Grassland Plan (Alternative H) addresses vegetation and wildlife management by:

- Prioritizing treatments in areas with sagebrush canopy cover >25% since these areas have less understory diversity. (Prescription 6.5 Goal 2, Objective 2, Vegetation Guideline 2; Grassland-wide Wildlife Guideline 3)

- Recommending thinning treatments which would retain sagebrush cover and are designed to move vegetation to near 15 percent canopy cover on 9,600 acres. (Grassland-wide Vegetation Goal 5; Prescription 6.5 Goals 1 & 2, Objective 2, Vegetation Guideline 3)

- Not seeding non-native understory into areas currently supporting native species. (Grassland-wide Standard 6)

- Improving riparian management which should improve summer brood-rearing habitat for grouse and general habitat conditions for riparian breeding birds. (Prescription 2.8.8 direction)

- Maintaining the current quantity of sagebrush in canopy cover >15% for sage grouse nesting and winter habitat. (Prescription 6.5, Goals 1 & 2)

- Incorporating a 0.25 mile buffer around active leks to prevent lek abandonment. (Grassland-wide Wildlife Standard 1)

- Requiring documentation for deviation from current sage grouse management guidelines in site-specific project analyses. (Grassland-wide, Sage Grouse Guideline 1)

- Modifying grazing use standards to address understory and residual vegetation concerns. (Prescription 6.5, Livestock Standard 1, Guideline 1)

- Placing emphasis on monitoring and gathering information on sage grouse population trends and how they relate to Grassland vegetation conditions. (Grassland-wide Sage Grouse Goal 2, Objectives 1 & 2; Monitoring Items Vegetation "Big sagebrush and mountain brush canopy cover", "Changes in shrub and understory diversity…", and "Vegetation changes"; Monitoring Item Wildlife—MIS "Sage grouse and Columbian sharp-tailed grouse")

**Social and Economic Factors**

The Grassland Plan resolves the social and economic issues by maintaining livestock numbers near current levels while still providing for improvement in the vegetation resources by reducing actual utilization levels. Head Months would average approximately 19,374 /year. While this is below current permitted numbers it is very close to the average authorized use of 19,489 head months/year which the permittees have been using for the past 5 years. Providing a predictable and sustainable level of forage will contribute to the economic stability of the area. No adjustments in permitted numbers would be made with this decision. If adjustments are necessary, they would be made during the allotment management planning process, within three years of the date of this Record of Decision. This Plan strengthens monitoring to include utilization mapping on the entire Grassland each year and

establish key area use monitoring transects (Grassland-wide Objective 2; Monitoring Item "Livestock Grazing").

In the Plan, upland utilization levels were modified to be more responsive to site-specific conditions:

- Use would average 50% across the Grassland. (Prescription 6.5 Livestock Standard 1)
- Pastures dominated by native vegetation or 16-24% canopy cover of sagebrush (sage grouse nesting habitat) would be grazed lighter. (Prescription 6.5 Livestock Guideline 1)
- Pastures dominated by non-native vegetation that benefits from heavier use (crested wheatgrass) would be higher. (Prescription 6.5 Livestock Guideline 1)
- Use levels in each pasture would be determined during the AMP revisions and adjusted yearly during Annual Operating meetings, if necessary. (Prescription 6.5 Livestock Standard 1, Guideline 1; Grassland-wide Livestock Standard 2)

Management of the Grassland according to the Grassland Plan (Alternative H) would increase payments to Oneida County by approximately $6500. Motorized travel is restricted to designated routes year-round (Grassland-wide Roads, Trails and Access Standard 1). The Plan includes direction to consider adjacent land uses during site-specific vegetation treatments (Prescription 6.5 Vegetation Guideline 4). Sweeten Pond will remain closed to livestock and be managed as a designated special wildlife area.

## WHAT IS/ARE THE ENVIRONMENTALLY PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE(S)?

Regulations implementing the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) require agencies to specify the alternative(s) considered to be environmentally preferable (40 CFR 1505.2(b)). Forest Service policy further defines this as the alternative that best meets the goals of section 101 of NEPA. This calls on Federal, State, and local governments and the public to create and maintain conditions under which humans and nature can exist in productive harmony. In determining the environmentally preferred alternative, I referred to the goals of Section 101:

1. Fulfill the responsibilities of each generation as trustee of the environment for succeeding generations;
2. Assure for all Americans safe, healthful, productive, and aesthetically and culturally pleasing surroundings;
3. Attain the widest range of beneficial uses of the environment without degradation, risk to health or safety, or other undesirable and unintended consequences;
4. Preserve important historic, cultural, and natural aspects of our national heritage and maintain wherever possible an environment which supports diversity and variety of individual choice;

5. Achieve a balance between population and resource use, which will permit high standards of living and a wide sharing of life's amenities; and

6. Enhance the quality of renewable resources and approach the maximum attainable recycling of depletable resources.

Alternatives *D* and *H—Selected Alternative* are the Environmentally Preferred Alternatives. Over the long term, Alternative H would cause "the least damage to the biological and physical environment" (CEQ 40 Most Asked Questions, #6A). Over the short term, Alternative D would cause the least damage due to the removal of livestock grazing.

- Alternative H is the best balance between maintaining ecosystem processes while considering the needs of sagebrush obligate species. The emphasis of this alternative is to maintain current levels of higher density sagebrush stands for sagebrush obligate species such as the sage grouse while providing for diversity. The treatments that will likely be proposed will help maintain a mosaic of canopy coverages over the long-term, benefiting more wildlife species.

- While Alternative D would remove livestock grazing, the lack of sagebrush management would not be environmentally preferable over the long term. Sagebrush stands would move further away from properly functioning conditions and become denser, resulting in a loss of diversity.

- Riparian conditions would improve the most with Alternatives D and G but those alternatives would not provide for diversity in the uplands.

## WHICH ALTERNATIVE MAXIMIZES THE PRESENT NET VALUE?

The NFMA requires the Forest to identify which alternative maximizes the Present Net Value (PNV) and how the selected alternative compares to this (36 CFR 219.12.j.2). According to the economic analysis in the Grassland Plan FEIS, Alternative E maximizes PNV. Alternative E has the highest PNV due to the moderate levels of all resource outputs estimated to be produced with full implementation of this alternative. This alternative maximizes the livestock grazing program. Alternative D has the lowest PNV, without a grazing program the benefits for this alternative are limited to recreation activities. Alternative H, however, has a PNV of 13.229; this is less than alternatives A, B, E, and F, primarily due to the lower level of grazing likely in Alternative H than in those other alternatives. A significant comparison between the PNV analysis and the cost and revenue analysis is that all PNVs are positive. (FEIS, Chapter 4, Social and Economic Factors)

While Alternative E maximizes PNV, I have selected Alternative H as the one which provides the highest net public benefit. Many of the benefits associated with the selected alternative are not captured in fees or revenues. For this reason, the alternative which maximizes PNV is not the alternative that has the highest net public benefit. On the Grassland, livestock grazing is the major source of income and changes in potential head months directly affect PNV. Maximum levels of livestock grazing defined in Alternative E would not produce the maximum net public benefit because of the effects on other resource conditions. PNV is lower in Alternative H for a variety of reasons; some are listed here and explained elsewhere throughout this ROD and the FEIS:

- Livestock grazing levels will be lower in riparian/wetland areas to improve riparian vegetation and stream conditions. (ROD, page 18)

- To address wildlife habitat and vegetation conditions, treatments which have little or no economic value, such as sagebrush thinning, will be funded. (ROD, pages 18-19)

- Livestock grazing levels will be lower in native vegetation and sage grouse nesting habitat to improve upland vegetation conditions. (ROD, pages 19-20)

- Monitoring requirements will be more costly with this Plan but will provide important information for future management of the Grassland. (ROD, page 17)

Part 5

# Findings Required by Law

## Findings Required by Law

### Significance of this Amendment to the 1985 Caribou LRMP

Under the National Forest Management Act (NFMA, 16 USC 1604(f)(4), forest plans may "be amended in any manner whatsoever after final adoption and after public notice, and, if such amendment would result in a significant change in such plan, in accordance with subsections (e) and (f) of this section and public involvement comparable to that required by subsection (d) of this section." The NFMA regulations at 36 CFR §219.10(f) state: "Based on an analysis of the objectives, guidelines, and other contents of the forest plan, the Forest Supervisor shall determine whether a proposed amendment would result in a significant change in the plan." The Forest Service Land and Resource Management Planning Handbook (Forest Service Handbook 1909.12) provides a framework for this analysis. Section 5.32 of FSH 1909.12 lists four factors to be used when determining whether a proposed change to a forest plan is significant or not significant: (a) timing; (b) location and size; (c) goals, objectives and outputs; and (d) management prescriptions. I have evaluated the proposed management direction and concluded that the Curlew Grassland Plan is a significant amendment of the 1985 Caribou National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan for the reasons described below:

**Timing**

The timing factor examines at what point, over the course of the forest plan period, the Plan is amended. Both the age of the underlying documents and the duration of the amendment are relevant considerations. The handbook indicates that the later in the time period, the less significant the change is likely to be. The Caribou LRMP was signed in 1985 and is currently undergoing revision. The amendment was done separately to more fully address the issues specific to the Grassland. Based on timing alone, the amendment would not be significant in terms of NFMA.

**Location and Size**

The key to the location and size is context, or "the relationship of the affected area to the overall planning area, the smaller the area affected, the less likely the change is to be a significant change in the forest plan." This amendment creates a separate 10 year Grassland Plan for the 47,000 acre Curlew. While the size of the area is still small compared to the entire Caribou-Targhee National Forest, its isolated location and local importance make the creation of a Grassland Plan significant.

**Goals, Objectives, and Outputs**

The goals, objectives, and outputs factor involves the determination of "whether the change alters the long-term relationship between the level of goods and services in the overall planning area" (Forest Service Handbook 1909.12, section 5.32(c)). This criterion concerns analysis of the overall forest

plan and the various multiple-use resources that may be affected. This amendment may not decrease the level of goods and services available on the Curlew but it has that potential. Livestock numbers may be reduced to meet the new utilization standards in the Plan. This would be determined in subsequent livestock management and allotment planning.

The Curlew amendment creates new desired future conditions, goals and objectives specifically for the Grassland. The overall emphasis of Grassland management will shift from livestock grazing to management of the vegetation for species and structural diversity. Specifically, sagebrush will be managed to retain current levels of sage grouse nesting habitat and livestock grazing will be adjusted to accommodate nesting sage grouse.

The guidance in Forest Service Handbook 1909.12, section 5.32(c) explains: "In most cases, changes in outputs are not likely to be a significant change in the forest plan unless the change would forego the opportunity to achieve an output in later years." For these reasons (and more), the direction in the Grassland Plan will forego the achievement of the goals and objectives in the 1985 Caribou LRMP and this change is considered significant.

**Management Prescriptions**

The management prescriptions factor involves the determination of (1), "whether the change in a management prescription is only for a specific situation or whether it would apply to future decisions throughout the planning area" and (2), "whether or not the change alters the desired future condition of the land and resources or the anticipated goods and services to be produced" (Forest Service Handbook 1909.12, section 5.32(d)).

Since the Grassland Plan assigns new prescription areas across the Curlew, the changes to this factor would be significant.

FINDING

On the basis of the information and analysis contained in the EIS and Grassland Plan and all other information available as summarized above, it is my determination that the change in management direction reflected in the Selected Alternative does result in a significant amendment to the 1985 Caribou LRMP.

## How does the Grassland Plan meet other Federal, State, and local regulations?

ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT

ESA provides for conservation of endangered, threatened and proposed species of fish, wildlife, and plants. There are no threatened, endangered, or proposed species known to inhabit the Grassland. In 1999 and 2000, surveys were conducted looking for Ute Ladies'-Tresses (*Spiranthes diluvialis*), a threatened plant; no plants or optimal habitat was found. A couple of sites containing marginal habitat were located. Except for undocumented sightings of bald eagles at Stone Reservoir, no listed species have been seen on the Grassland. A biological assessment (BA) was prepared and submitted to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on November 27 of 2001. According to the BA, there would be no effect to the gray wolf, Ute Ladies'-Tresses, Canada lynx, yellow-billed cuckoo.

## CLEAN AIR ACT

Preparation of a Land and Resource Management Plan is a programmatic action and as such does not authorize any site-specific activity. Despite this, some prescribed burning may occur as a result of direction in this Plan. According to the FEIS, the project proposals associated with the selected alternative "may create short-term adverse effects on air quality and visibility. Compliance with mitigation measures [Plan direction] and smoke management plans would result in no adverse long-term effects." (FEIS, Chapter 4, Air Quality/Visibility Analysis) These potential impacts will be analyzed at the project level and will comply with regulations of the State of Idaho (Title 39, Idaho Code). This Plan protects air quality through compliance with the rules, regulations, and permit procedures of the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality. Grassland-wide direction included in Chapter 3 of the Plan will insure that air quality complies with the Clean Air Act and other state requirements (FEIS, Chapter 4, Air Quality/Visibility Analysis; Plan Chapter 3, Air Quality).

## NATIONAL HISTORIC PRESERVATION ACT

Preparation of a Land and Resource Management Plan is a programmatic action and as such does not authorize any site-specific activity. Projects undertaken in response to the direction in this Plan will fully comply with the laws and regulations that insure protection of heritage resources. The Plan contains extensive direction for heritage resource management including ways to more fully integrate heritage resource management with other resource activities (Plan Chapter 3, Heritage Resources).

Several other laws apply to preservation of heritage resources on federal land. Since this amendment does not authorize ground disturbing activities, consultation with the Idaho and Wyoming State Preservation Offices (SHPO) under the National Historic Preservation Act is not required. The Shoshone-Bannock Tribe was consulted during all phases of developing this Plan (Analysis File).

## CLEAN WATER ACT

The Curlew National Grassland is intermingled with adjacent private and public lands and the majority of the watersheds lie outside of the 47,000 acres administered by the Forest Service. Thus, watershed condition and water quality on the Grassland is greatly influenced by the activities of other owners that occur upstream, outside of the Grassland. Despite this, surface water within the Grassland must comply with state and federal water quality standards. The South Fork of Rock Creek has been identified by the State of Idaho as a water quality limited stream under section 303(d) of the Act. Total Maximum Daily Loads (TMDLs) for sediment have been set by the State and these standards apply to all landowners within the watershed.

The Grassland Plan contains a section with direction to insure that the Grassland management activities maintain or improve water quality and comply with the Clean Water Act. One standard in that section is intended to allow for small short-term additions of pollutants if it can be demonstrated that the progress toward attainment is maintained or improved by the project, and such additions will not cause unacceptable adverse environmental effects. It is recognized that some management activities may cause small additions of pollutants in the short-term, yet the progress toward attainment of beneficial use standards is not affected, or may even be improved by the project in the long-term. Assessment models do not provide a precise linear projection of progress toward attainment, but instead project progress within a range of variation. Also, in natural systems the progression toward recovery is not linear, but fluctuates as a result of natural factors. This standard, along with the other direction, insures that management activities will comply fully with the intent of the Clean Water Act

(Plan, Chapter 3, Water Quality; Rx 2.8.8). This, in conjunction with other changes such as the corridor and riparian pasture fencing and forage utilization standards should help improve water quality and meet beneficial use criteria within the Grassland (FEIS, Chapter 4, Clean Water Act).

### MIGRATORY BIRD TREATY ACT

Preparation of a Land and Resource Management Plan is a programmatic action and as such does not authorize any site-specific activity. The Grassland Plan includes direction to improve understory diversity in sagebrush stands and to improve overall riparian conditions (described in Section "Riparian and Watershed Management", above). One of the management indicator species for the Grassland is riparian breeding birds (Plan Chapters 3 and 5). The Plan does not authorize any activities which would cause a decline in habitat for migratory bird species. Potential impacts to habitat from proposed vegetation treatments will be analyzed at the project level. Management and monitoring activities are in compliance with the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and Executive Order of January 12, 2001 Responsibility of Federal Agencies to Protect Migratory Birds.

### ENERGY REQUIREMENT AND CONSERVATION POTENTIAL

Preparation of a Land and Resource Management Plan is a programmatic action and as such does not authorize any site-specific activity. Because the scope of the proposed action is so limited both in terms of geographic area and extent of activities, the FEIS determined that the Plan would have little or no effect on current local energy use and offers no opportunity for energy conservation in the local area. The Plan contains direction for allowing energy corridors on the Grassland (Plan, Chapter 3, Lands).

### INVASIVE SPECIES

Preparation of a Land and Resource Management Plan is a programmatic action and as such does not authorize any site-specific activity. Executive Order 13112 on Invasive Species directs that federal agencies should not authorize any activities which would increase the spread of invasive species. Alternative H and the subsequent Grassland Plan include direction which would help limit the spread of invasive species. The Plan does not allow cross-country motorized travel, thereby eliminating one of the pathways by which invasive species are spread. The Plan requires that integrated pest management methods are used to contain and control the spread of invasive species, following the latest Caribou-Targhee Noxious Weed Strategy (Plan, Chapter 3, Standard 2). The Plan also allows the use of non-native species to counteract cheatgrass invasions, if necessary (Plan, Chapter 3, Standard 6). The Plan is in compliance with E.O. 13112.

### PRIME FARMLAND, RANGELAND AND FOREST LAND

The selected alternative (H) and the Grassland Plan are in accordance with the Secretary of Agriculture's Memorandum #1827 regarding conservation of prime farmland, rangeland, and forestland. This Plan manages the Grassland with sensitivity towards adjacent private and public land uses. It includes guidance to consider adjacent land uses when conducting management activities on the Grassland. The guidance in the Plan emphasizes coordination with other landowners to minimize impacts on their management.

### ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE, EQUAL EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITY, EFFECTS ON MINORITIES, WOMEN, ETC.

The FEIS describes the impacts to social and economic factors in Chapter 4 and Appendix B. The primary zone of influence, Oneida County, is rural and highly dependent upon agricultural industry. The Grassland is also within lands traditionally used by members of the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes. The Plan maintains near current livestock use levels and does not substantially limit other uses and opportunities on the Grassland. This Plan would not have a disproportionate impact on any minority or low-income communities. The government is an equal opportunity employer; this is disclosed in the FEIS and the Plan. Civil rights of any citizens, including women and minorities will not be differentially affected by this Plan.

### WETLANDS AND FLOODPLAINS

The Plan contains direction for improvements in the riparian areas and insures compliance with state and federal water quality standards. The Plan establishes a management prescription area for Riparian/Wetland Areas (Rx 2.8.8) which is specifically designed to improve conditions in these areas. Actions such as fencing and riparian utilization standards are designed to improve riparian area trends within the next decade. (Plan, Chapter 3, Chapter 4, Rx 2.8.8).

### CONFLICTS WITH OTHER AGENCY GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The existing body of national direction for managing National Forests remains in effect. The standards and guidelines presented herein provide direction more specific to the needs of the Curlew National Grassland. A summary of national program and regional policy and goals can be found in Appendix **A**. The direction from the references cited in Appendix **A** is incorporated herein. Consultation with other agencies indicates that there are no major conflicts between the direction in the Plan and the goals and objectives of other government entities.

## What are the adverse effects that cannot be avoided?

Preparation of a Land and Resource Management Plan is a programmatic action and as such does not authorize any site-specific activity. The effects on the environment that might result from project level implementation of any of the alternatives analyzed in the FEIS include some unavoidable adverse environmental effects. These are discussed as irreversible and irretrievable effects in Chapter Four of the FEIS and listed below by issue.

### RIPARIAN AND WATERSHED MANAGEMENT

- Plowing or trampling can degrade microbiotic crusts and reduce ground cover.
- Watershed conditions and ground cover potentials will be reduced in areas dominated by bulbous bluegrass.
- For as long as roads and trails are in place, infiltration capacity of the soil within the road or trail prism would be lost resulting in increased runoff and erosion potential.
- Many of the stream channels in the Grassland have been degraded to the point that it would be impractical to restore them to pre-disturbance conditions. These conditions should be

stabilized by the management direction in the Plan but full functionality may not be realized for many decades.

- Activities such as livestock grazing will have adverse effects on stream channel systems but the Plan contains direction which would minimize these and facilitate recovery of degraded systems.

## VEGETATION/WILDLIFE HABITAT MANAGEMENT

- While bulbous bluegrass sites are producing below their biological potential, understory diversity and forage production would be adversely affected. The Plan directs understory improvement in these areas but not all of them would be improved in the Planning period.

- Past management practices have altered the successional pathways and processes on the majority of the Grassland. The loss of biodiversity is an unavoidable effect. The Plan does contain direction to counteract some of the past management activities.

- High quality sagebrush habitat may be temporarily lost to maintain a diversity of canopy cover classes.

## ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL VALUES

- To comply with utilization standards in the Plan, livestock grazing levels may be reduced.

- Closure of the Grassland to cross-country motorized travel may adversely affect some individuals' recreational experience.

# Part 6 Conclusion

## Implementation and Appeals

### How and when will the Grassland Plan be implemented?

Implementation of the Grassland Plan will be accomplished and tracked through the objectives detailed in the Plan. These are summarized in Table 5.1 of the Curlew National Grassland Plan. This schedule will be used to help design the program of work for each resource group. It will also be used to assist budget allocations each year. According to the regulations at 36 CFR 217.10, implementation of this Plan will begin 7 days after publication of my decision in the Idaho Statesman. All Grassland Plan Standards and Guidelines will become effective on that date. Some of the key objectives and when they will be accomplished are listed in Part 4 of this ROD. Grassland goals are expected to be accomplished within this planning period.

Decisions on site-specific projects are not made in the Curlew Grassland Plan. Those will be made after site-specific analysis and documentation in compliance with NEPA, and may be subject to appeal at that time.

### How can this decision be appealed?

This decision is subject to appeal pursuant to the provisions of 36 CFR 217.3. A written notice of appeal must be filed with the Chief of the Forest Service within 90 days of the date that this decision appears in the Idaho Statesman. The appeal must be filed with the reviewing officer:

Chief of the Forest Service, Dale Bosworth
Washington Office
14th and Independence, SW
201 14th Street
Washington, D.C. 20250

A copy of the appeal must simultaneously be sent to the deciding officer:

Regional Forester of the Intermountain Region
USDA Forest Service
324 25th Street
Ogden, UT 84401

Notice of appeal must include sufficient narrative evidence and argument to show why this decision should be changed or reversed (36 CFR 217.9). Requests to stay approval of the Curlew Grassland Plan will not be granted (36 CFR 217.10(a)).

## Where can I obtain more information on this Grassland Plan?

More information on the Final EIS and the Curlew Grassland Plan can be obtained by contacting any one of the following people:

Jerry Reese, Caribou-Targhee Forest Supervisor
1405 Hollipark Drive
Idaho Falls, Idaho 83401
(208) 557-5760

Jerald Tower, Westside District Ranger
415 South Arthur Ave.
Pocatello, Idaho 83204
(208) 236-7500

Linda Ward, Interdisciplinary Team Leader
415 South Arthur Ave.
Pocatello, Idaho 83204
(208) 236-7500

Cheryl Probert, Forest Planner
1405 Hollipark Drive
Idaho Falls, Idaho 83401
(208) 557-5760

## Conclusion

For the past two years, Caribou-Targhee National Forest and Westside District personnel have worked with members of the public, including other agency personnel and Tribal members to produce this Grassland Plan. I am pleased to make a decision based upon solid coordination and cooperation that insures sustainable conditions for the ecological and human environments on the Curlew National Grassland.

_____ _____

JACK TROYER
Acting Regional Forester, Intermountain Region

Date